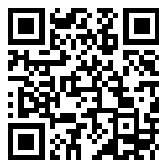

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English Grammar in Elementary Schools.

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ENGLISH GRAMMAR IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS.

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IN our elementary schools, the most unsatisfactory study pursued is probably English grammar. Recognizing this fact, many leading educators have, within the last few years, prepared books on language lessons which are so well adapted to the different grades that grammar, as a study, in many schools has been excluded. The object which the authors of these books have in view is an effort in the right direction. The idea that a child, at the beginning, should be drilled in the use of language as the expression of thought is undoubtedly correct; for pupils in the lower grades should be taught the use of language rather than reasons for its use. In these grades the facts of language should be taught rather than the rules of grammar; for the etymological changes in modern English are so very few and simple that children can, at an early age, learn most of them without knowing anything about the rules in regard to these changes.

The suggestions contained in many of the language lesson books are admirably suited to the lower grades, but they are not all fully adapted to the needs of pupils in the seventh and eighth grades. In these grades something more than mere suggestions with regard to the use of language is necessary; some of the principles concerning the laws which control the changes, the development, and the usages of our language should be taught. But how can this be done? Shall we use a text-book on English grammar? Francis W. Parker says, "Technical grammar, as it is usually taught, effectually disgusts children and bars the way to deeper insight into the beauty and strength of language."* Nearly every teacher who has attempted to teach technical grammar to pupils in classes below high school work will agree with Mr. Parker in this statement. Why is this true? Are the teachers in the seventh and eighth grades to blame, or is the fault with the text-books in current use? The teachers, in some instances, may be justly blamed, but the main fault can probably be traced to the books commonly called "English grammars."

* Notes and Talks on Teaching. P. 93.

Nothing in our school work can be more absurd than the definitions and rules set forth in some of these books. In many of them, which strange to say, are made to include orthography and prosody, English grammar is defined to be a science which teaches how to speak and write the English language correctly. The word "correctly," if it has any meaning in its use here, implies that the definitions and rules contained in these books are founded upon verbal forms and the relations of these forms to other words in the sentences, and not upon the thoughts expressed in them. But modern English is preëminently an uninflected language; and the laws governing its usages are based chiefly upon the logical arrangements of the words in the sentence rather than upon the inflected forms of words. About ninety per cent. of the authors of these books, ignorant in regard to the inflections of our language in the earlier stages of its development, and not recognizing the fact that English, in its present state, is almost a grammarless tongue, fill their books with rules which have very little and often no application to the English language. Many of these rules are borrowed from the Latin grammar where the meaning in the sentence depends upon the inflectional forms of the words used; whereas in English it depends chiefly upon the logical construction of the sentence. The rules: "A verb must agree with its subject in person and number." "An adjective or participle belongs to a noun or pronoun." "Active verbs and prepositions govern nouns in the objective case," etc., do not have the same meaning when applied to English sentences as they do in their application to Latin. The sentence, *The good boys love the girl*, expressed in Latin is, *Boni pueri puellam amant*; but *The boys love the good girl* is, *Pueri bonam puellam amant*. Here it is clear that the different meanings expressed in the two English sentences are indicated by the logical arrangement; the words in the two sentences are identical as far as form is concerned. If the terms "agree," "belong to," and "govern," have any application to English sentences and are to be used in the teaching of English grammar, they should be used with the understanding that the application is specially limited to our parsing exercises; for, as far as inflection is concerned, these statements with regard to agreement, government, etc., are exceptions rather than general rules.*

* With the exception of a few pronouns and the verb *be* all the inflectional endings of modern English can be printed, in long primer type, in a space one inch square.

Parsing exercises, as class drills, may, however, in many instances be advantageous; the rules mentioned above, together with other rules borrowed from Latin grammars, if used with proper reservations, may assist pupils to a better understanding of the construction of English sentences. Professor Hinsdale says, "Pupils should be taught the facts and relations that are expressed by inflections and position, and the best way to do it is to require them to describe the words, telling what they are and naming their properties; for that is what parsing is."* But we should be very careful, as Richard Grant White says how we "measure our English corn in Latin bushels";† for some of these borrowed rules and many which are made up by the authors of these text-books are not only useless but are misleading. The rule requiring the superlative to be used only in comparing more than two things, belongs to Latin and not to English grammar; for our best writers use the superlative in comparing two things whenever euphony requires it; and, moreover, there are instances when we have no English idiom by means of which we can express the comparison of two things by using a comparative degree; for example: If two people are at work, one happens to finish his task and says to the other, "I finished mine first," what else could he say that would be more idiomatic and expressive? In many text-books we find a rule prohibiting the placing of the adverb between *to* of the infinitive and the infinitive itself. But this, too, is a rule which belongs to the text-books and not to literary English.‡ The sentence, *To-morrow is Sunday*, is as good idiomatic English as *To-morrow will be Sunday*, but grammatical precisionists tell us that the former is incorrect, because the verb has not the future-tense form; probably not knowing that the English language originally had no regular forms or set verb-phrases by which future time was expressed except by using the regular present-tense forms. I wonder if these precisionists always say, "*I shall go to town to-morrow*," instead of *I am going to town to-morrow*? A teacher once gave his class the following rule: "A preposition is a bad word to end a sentence with." The pupils, who forget most rules of grammar which they are required to learn in school, are to be congratulated; but the rule given by this teacher is well worth remembering. True, it has

* *Teaching the Language Arts*, by B. A. Hinsdale, p. 166, D. Appleton & Co.

† *Words and their Uses*, p. 280, Houghton, Mifflin & Co.

‡ See Baskerville and Sewell's Grammar, p. 324, American Book Co.

no application whatever to the laws or principles which control the construction of English sentences, but it serves to show that the teacher who was attempting to be precise, unconsciously used good idiomatic English.

It has been shown above that in our parsing exercises, the rules copied from Latin grammars should be used with reservation; we might extend this caution further and say that all parsing in English grammar should be used with reservation. The English is the least grammatical of all languages; no language can boast of such graceful flexibility; its idiom can not be restrained by grammatical rules; in short, it was not made to parse. Many of our everyday idiomatic expressions can not be so reconstructed that they can be parsed in accordance with the rules ordinarily laid down in the text-books. In the sentences, *He is a friend of mine*, and *Give me that book of John's*, shall we parse "mine" and "John's" in the possessive case, and at the same time in the objective case "governed" by prepositions? In the sentences, *If you please*, and *If she please,* you and she* can not logically be parsed as nominatives used as subjects; for the meaning here is, *If it please you*, *If it please her*, in which *you* and *her* are datives following the impersonal verb *please*. In the sentence, "*He was given a dinner*," according to the rules for parsing generally found in the text-books, *he* should be parsed as the subject of *was given*, a verb in the passive voice; but a verb in the passive voice, it is claimed, is one "that represents the subject as acted upon"; now, the meaning implied in this sentence is, *A dinner was given to him*, consequently the pronoun *he* can not logically be parsed as the subject. Many expressions in daily use are too flexible to be restrained by iron-bound rules: *A house to rent* is more frequently used than *A House to be rented*; *A bridge is building* is as good English as *A bridge is being built*; *I am informed* is as good as *I have been informed*. Lincoln, in his speech at Gettysburg, said, "*We are met*." In order to please the precisionists I suppose he should have said, *We have met*. Some of our idioms which are used by our best writers are not even logical: *The two first*, as it is often used, is not logical; for, it may be logically claimed that since in any given series there can be but one first, the expression should be made to read, *The first two*; and the sentence, *I don't think he will come*, logically speaking, should be, *I think he will not*

* An explanation of these and other similar idioms is given by Prof. E. A. Allen in his *English Grammar Viewed from all Sides*, EDUCATION, March, '89.

come. But these and many similar idiomatic expressions defying both grammar and logic, stand as characteristics of our noble Teutonic ancestry. Because they can not be used in the text-books as models for parsing, is no reason why we should call them examples of bad English. They are part and parcel of our vernacular language and can not be exiled from it by any parsing scheme no matter how ingenious it may be.

Probably the most common mistake found in the so-called English grammars which are inflicted upon the young people in our preparatory schools is in the classification of the English verb. Take, if you please, a few of these books and examine the lists of irregular verbs. Nearly all include in these lists the verbs: *have, hide, burn, sleep, weep, feel*, etc., which are all perfectly regular, in fact as regular as the verb *love*. In order to be convinced of this it is not necessary to refer to Maetzner, Sievers, Earle, Whitney, and other philologists who have written such valuable expositions with regard to the English verb; all that is necessary is a glance at a few of the earlier masterpieces of our mother-tongue. The pages of Chaucer, Langland and Gower teem with inflectional endings of our verb. One of the principles of the Teutonic group of languages, of which the English as well as the German is a member, is that the verb is so inflected that it can be, and is regularly divided into two classes: the STRONG or IRREGULAR verbs, such as *come, give, throw*, etc., or those which form their past tense by a change of the vowel sound; and the WEAK or REGULAR verbs (many of which in modern English are apparently irregular), or those which form their past tense by the addition of -ed or -t.

Now, it may be claimed by the authors of these so-called grammars that the historical classification is not practical, that young pupils in the seventh and eighth grades should not be expected to learn something which they do not understand,—that they are not able to read Chaucer, and many of them have not had an opportunity to learn to speak or read the modern German language, where the inflectional endings showing the weak forms of the verbs are still retained. But this claim is not pedagogical; if we do not give them the correct classification, we should certainly not try to teach any classification at all! What right have we to make up a classification for them which is not historically true — a classification which they will have to unlearn when they

take up more advanced work in English language? The young pupil who is beginning the study of mensuration in arithmetic, when required to find the circumference of a circle, is not expected to understand why he multiplies by 3.14159; he is, nevertheless, required to use it as a multiplier; and is promised that the reason for using it will be satisfactorily explained when he is sufficiently advanced to take up the study of geometry. How absurd it would be for some one to write an arithmetic in which he should make a rule, "practical for young people," by substituting in the place of 3.14159, some number, say 5, 6, or 10, which could be more easily used as a multiplier! Yet it would be no more absurd than what many grammar makers are doing when they make a classification of verbs which is unscientific, misleading, and which has not even the merit of being easy to learn. How much more natural and reasonable it would appear to the beginner in the study of English grammar if he is told that a weak verb is one which is too weak to form its own past tense, and an additional syllable must be brought in to help it form that past tense.

In many of our preparatory schools text-books are used in which diagramming is made a prominent feature. Clark's and Harvey's old text-books have, in most places, been relegated to oblivion; but there are others still in use which should be consigned to the same fate. Among these, probably the most popular are the two books called *Graded Lessons* and *Higher Lessons in English*, by Reed and Kellogg. One, it is claimed by its authors, is "an elementary English grammar," and the other, "a work on English grammar and composition"; but grammar, in both books, is subordinated to diagramming. In the preparatory schools of some of our cities the "Graded Lessons" is used in the fifth grade, and the "Higher Lessons" in the sixth and seventh grades. The teachers in following the suggestions in these books are expected to require their pupils to draw on the blackboards, horizontal lines intersected by vertical lines at regularly prescribed angles, and at the extremities of these vertical lines to draw other horizontal lines. The pupils are then required to dissect good English sentences and to hang the mutilated parts on these diagrams. This process brings to mind the story of a savage giant who kept a tavern; if any of his guests happened to be too long for the beds to which they were assigned, their feet and parts of their legs

were chopped off, piece by piece, until they were made sufficiently short to correspond to the beds; or, if too short, a stretching machine was applied to make them long enough to fit the beds. The theory held by this tavern keeper, that all people should be made to fit his beds, is similar to the one now held by some authors of text-books, that all sentences in English should be made to fit into their prescribed diagrams. The difference is in degree not in kind.

But diagramming like parsing may, in some instances, be advantageous. Any device that can be employed in assisting the pupils to a better understanding of the relations of words and groups of words in a sentence is certainly to be commended, provided the device is made a means and not an end, in teaching English. But if teachers are compelled to use text-books containing complicated systems of diagramming, they must of necessity make diagramming the end to be accomplished, if their pupils are to understand the puzzling process. How much better it would be if some system could be adopted by means of which the sentences to be analyzed could be left intact! Many sentences which are used in the text-books as models for diagramming are taken from our best authors; they are flowers of literature whose beauty is sometimes sadly marred and often totally destroyed by being subjected to the existing diagramming processes.

The treatment of the verb with respect to its mood, in most text-books, is certainly very discouraging to both teachers and pupils. Most authorities recognize, in the finite verb, only three moods, namely: the indicative, the subjunctive, and the imperative. There is no reason why there should be a potential mood. We are told that a verb is in the potential mood when it expresses power, etc.; we might as well say that a verb is in the *volential* mood when it expresses will, or in the *sentential* mood when it expresses feeling. It is claimed by some that the subjunctive mood is fast fading out of our language, and that it is now so seldom used that we no longer need to make any note of it in the study of our grammar. True, the subjunctive is not found as often in recent popular writers as it was in our literature a few centuries ago. Our newspaper editorials and magazine articles are not as rich in the use of the subjunctive as are the pages of Shakespeare or the King James version of the Bible; but in examining the choicest specimens of our modern literature and

even passages in our newspapers and magazines where forcible English is used it will be seen that there are many nice shades of thought which could not be expressed without using the subjunctive. If we take a few selections from any of our best modern poets and paraphrase the sentences so as to turn the subjunctives into indicatives we destroy much of the strength and beauty contained in them. It must, however, be admitted that it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish the subjunctive from the indicative; because it often happens that the two moods are expressed either by the same form or by the same verb-phrase. But this is no reason why it should be excluded from our elementary English grammars; the subjunctive if properly presented, can be made both easy and interesting to beginners. How much better, then, it is to teach them some of its beauties than to confuse them with the inconsistencies of the so-called potential!

We are told by those who claim that we need a potential mood that it is distinguished from the other moods by the model auxiliaries, *may, can, must, might, could, would* and *should*. But these so-called model auxiliaries are often used in modern English, as in old English and German, as finite verbs. If some fourteen-year-old boy in a sixth or seventh grade class should be called upon to parse the words in the sentence, *You must obey the laws*, the boy, in spite of the restraint of grammatical rules, might suggest that since it is an imperative sentence one of the verbs in the sentence should be parsed as an imperative; but the teacher, calling the boy's attention to a certain page of the text-book, will probably reply, "Oh, no, Johnnie, the verb *must obey*, is in the potential mood." The teacher has the text-book on her side, but the boy has common sense on his. The boy is right; for *must* is the past-tense form of the old verb, *motan** which in modern English is represented by the same form in the present as in the past tense. The verb *must*, as used in this sentence, retains its original finite use as well as its imperative meaning, and is therefore in the imperative mood and present tense followed by the infinitive, *obey*.

Very few of the elementary text-books give any clear idea with regard to the nature of our infinitive. The rule given with regard to the omission of the "sign to" after *bid, dare, feel*, etc., is both ambiguous and misleading; it is ambiguous, because the word

* The old form for the present tense is still found in *So mote it be*.

"omit" might be understood as implying that these verbs were formerly followed by infinitives with *to*; it is misleading, because it should be made to include the so-called model auxiliaries mentioned above, together with *do*, *shall*, *will*, etc. In the sentence, *Thou shalt not steal*, *shalt steal* is not a future tense as we are told in most text-books; *shalt* is a present imperative, and *steal* is an infinitive. Of course it cannot be claimed that *shall*, *will*, *may*, *can*, *must*, etc., are never used as auxiliaries. According to usage in modern English, they are used as auxiliaries more frequently than as finite verbs; for, since the modern English has no infinitive ending, and since the force of the thought in the sentence more frequently turns upon the verb which in earlier English was the regular infinitive, we now naturally call it the principal verb. Thus, in *I shall go*, we now regard *go* as the principal, or finite verb and *shall* as the mere tense sign; while in *Thou shalt not steal*, the force of the imperative meaning is expressed by the verb *shalt* which can not logically be regarded as a tense sign. But the verbs *shall* and *will* are so often used as tense-signs, that paradigms, in our elementary text-books, showing the conjugations, should include our verb-phrases which we now call the future and future perfect tenses; yet separate paradigms should also be used which show the full conjugation of the verbs, *shall*, *will*, *may*, and *can*, with their respective past-tense forms, *should*, *would*, *might*, and *could**. With such an arrangement, the beginners in English grammar would be afforded an opportunity to learn something in regard to the real nature of these verbs, and their true relations to the following infinitives and to other words used in the construction of the sentence.

Since there is so little connection between the study of English grammar and the use of the English language; since so many of the rules for parsing contained in the text-books are rules that belong to Latin and not English; and since fully ninety per cent. of these text-books are misleading, the question is, shall we attempt to teach English grammar at all? Is there a place for it either in our elementary grades, or in our high school classes? A pupil before entering college should, somewhere and somehow, learn some of the elements of English grammar. In passing his entrance examinations for college he should be no more excusable for ignorance concerning the fundamental laws of his language

* See E. A. Allen's revised edition of Salmon's Grammar, pp. 145, 146. Longmans Green & Co.

than ignorance concerning the elementary principles of mathematics or the sciences. Professor Hinsdale says, "Good grammatical definitions and rules express facts just as much as the definitions and rules of mathematics or physics; and to teach grammar is to teach these facts."* Now, since the elements of English grammar should be taught somewhere, probably the most appropriate place for the subject is in the seventh and eighth grades of the elementary grade work, and a brief review of it in the last year of the high school.

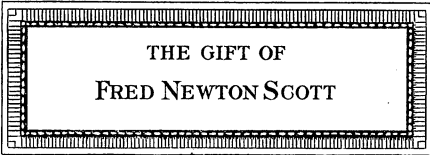
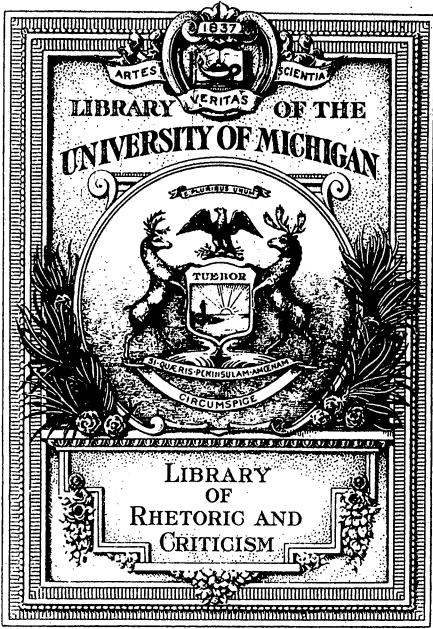
The most important consideration in the teaching of elementary English grammar is unquestionably the selection of an appropriate text-book. The facts taught in the lower grades through the suggestions found in the language lesson books depend chiefly upon the general information of the teachers, and their ingenuity in adapting these suggestions to the needs of the pupils under their charge. But when a text-book on English grammar is put into the hands of the pupils it should be one that is, as far as possible, stripped of rules and definitions which apply to neither old English, middle English, nor modern English—one which will not confuse and mislead both teacher and pupils. Although a majority of the text-books in use are as dangerous in teaching English language as the pernicious yellow-back novels would be in teaching literature, there are a few which are based on historical principles and which are well adapted to high school classes and some, too, which can be used with safety in the last year, and in some schools, in the last two years of the elementary grade work. But English grammar, in the elementary schools, should not be taught as a study by itself, apart from literature. The classics, which are used as supplementary readers in the language lesson and reading classes, should be used, as often as possible, as supplementary work in grammar. An elementary text-book on English grammar, based on true historical principles, thus accompanied by specimens from our best writers, can be made one of the most interesting as well as one of the most profitable subjects taught in our elementary schools.

* *Teaching the Language-Arts*, p. 167.

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